

## Finalizing families

BY ALAN INGRAM

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Six-year-old Dominic Weatherwax and his 4-year-old brother, Moses, tapped the gavel on the bench and murmured, "We're adjourned." Moments later, it became official.



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Dominic, Moses, and their 17-month-old brother, Luc, became the sons of Grand Haven Township residents John and Tracey Weatherwax at Ottawa County Adoption Day at the Fillmore Street Complex in West Olive on Tuesday.

"Quite a few times I had to hold back tears," John said. "It's exciting to just be there and be a part of it, and have so many family and friends there be a part of it."

For John, the process became a reality when Ottawa County Circuit Judge Jon Hulsing, who presided over the proceedings, finalized the boy's last names as Weatherwax, the new father said.

For Tracey, it will likely become a reality when the family can get back to its regular routine, she explained.

"It's very exciting," she said.



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In all, 12 different adoptions for 19 different children took place during the county's

Adoption Day. Pat VerDuin, Ottawa County juvenile services director, said Tuesday's event was both successful and the biggest in its three-year history.

Balloons decorated the courtroom and the adopted children received bags of goodies. The cameras that were in the bags, in particular, entertained Dominic and Moses throughout the proceedings.

The three brothers shared the proceedings with another family member, their 2-year-old brother, Eli, whose adoption by Park Township resident Denise Hodge was finalized at the same time.

Tuesday will not be the last time the boys will all be together, though, as Hodge and the Weatherwaxes have agreed to keep the boys in contact with each other.

Hulsing said he thinks Adoption Day serves a dual purpose — to recognize the foster and adoptive parents, and to publicize the need for more foster or adoptive parents.

"So often, adoptive parents (and) foster parents don't get the credit that they deserve, or people aren't aware of the need that's out there," Hulsing said. "... In many ways, the public at large doesn't really know how many children are out here looking for adoptive homes. They aren't aware of the need."

VerDuin added that Adoption Day can also make people think about what it would be like to adopt someone.

Hulsing participated in Ottawa County Adoption Day for the first time in its three-year history. He said as a judge, he is often involved in negative things that can result in families being broken up. Adoption Day, however, sees a positive court outcome for families and children.

"You're involved in putting a family together," Hulsing said of the adoption process. "You're placing children who want to be just like any other kid. All kids want to be loved. They want to have a home, a mom and a dad, and this is an opportunity to give children that stability that all kids want."

Hulsing got something "unexpected" early in the day when a young boy who had just been adopted approached him and gave him a hug.

"That's very rewarding," the judge said. "I told him, I said, 'Hey, thanks, you made my day.' That was great."